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SUBJECT: BELEAGUERED NRW SPD REELECTS CHAIRWOMAN; DELEGATES DOUBTFUL
ABOUT BECK CHANCELLOR CANDIDACY

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11. (SBU) Summary: At a state party convention on April 5, the North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW) Social Democrats (SPD) reelected chair Hannelore Kraft by a landslide, setting her up to lead the party in four important elections in the state over the next 18 months. As the party strives to return to power in Germany's former social democratic heartland, Kraft and visiting national SPD chair Kurt Beck stressed their goal of pushing back Left Party influence, but did not rule out future cooperation at the state level. Kraft energized her party, but remains far from becoming Minister President in 2010. The convention might have bolstered Beck's comeback as party chairman, but few delegates expected him to be SPD chancellor candidate in 2009. End Summary.

A Beleaguered Party Prepares for 2009/2010 Elections

12. (U) Some 450 delegates convened in Duesseldorf for their annual convention on April 5. The meeting came at a time when the NRW SPD faces an unprecedented erosion of its electoral base, partially a result of its leadership crisis nationally in the wake of the controversy in Hesse about cooperation with the Left Party. The most recent opinion poll, published on the eve of the convention, showed the NRW SPD at an all-time low, trailing the CDU by 10 percent (31 vs. 41 percent) two years before the next state parliament elections. This is the largest gap between the two parties since 1958, after which NRW evolved into West Germany's social democratic "heartland," enabling the SPD to govern continuously for almost 40 years until 2005. The conclave was the first in a series of events planned for the next 18 months to prepare for the 2009 statewide local, European Parliament, and federal elections, as well as the 2010 state parliament polls.

A Vote of Confidence for Kraft

14. (SBU) The most important outcome was the reelection of Hannelore Kraft (46), SPD state parliament Floor Leader since May 2005 and State Chair since January 2007. The sole candidate, she received 97 percent of the vote, one point more than in 2007. A Kraft confidant claimed that this vote of confidence proves that she can rally the party behind her and lead it back to power in 2010.

Beck tries to get a Boost from NRW SPD

15. (SBU) National SPD chair Kurt Beck used the convention to

try to profit from the image of a united party. In a well-choreographed move, he entered the hall when delegates were giving Kraft a standing ovation, creating the impression for TV that the crowd was celebrating him. Nevertheless, he put in a "solid performance," as several delegates put it, doing no damage to his reputation and evidently convincing many of the rank and file that he's on the upswing. Delegates who had been present at the Hamburg national convention last fall told us that Beck's speech in Duesseldorf was "much better."

¶16. (SBU) Several delegates indicated to us that they expect Beck to continue as national SPD chairman, but left no doubt that "somebody else" (e.g. Foreign Minister Steinmeier) would be the party's next chancellor candidate. Two politicians with key positions in the national SPD pointed out to us that such a tandem solution has worked well in the past (i.e. with Brandt/Schmidt and Lafontaine/Schroeder).

Cooperation with Left Party Possible

¶17. (U) In their speeches, both Kraft and Beck touched on possible cooperation with the Left Party. Kraft vowed that the NRW SPD would do everything possible to keep the Left below five percent and out of the Landtag. The SPD seeks "conflict," (sic) she stated, not cooperation, with the Left. However, she also stressed that it made no sense to speculate about possible coalitions two years before the next elections, thus leaving the door open for cooperation, if necessary, to replace the CDU-FDP coalition.

¶18. (SBU) Beck reiterated the official SPD position that each state organization would decide for itself whether to cooperate with the Left Party, but that there would be no such cooperation at the national level. A district chairman from the Ruhr region told us the SPD's commitment against cooperation with the Left nationally would only hold as long as Lafontaine remained Left Party Bundestag floor leader (as an SPD renegade, the SPD leadership would refuse to deal with him). Another national SPD figure from the Ruhr confided that he was unhappy with Beck's

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and Kraft's statements on this issue, as he would have liked them to disassociate themselves from the Left Party in clearer terms.

Comment

¶19. (SBU) In contrast to the uncertainty surrounding the national SPD leadership, the NRW party projected an image of unity behind Hannelore Kraft. She may have energized her party, but she will have a difficult uphill battle to regain power in its former heartland. Kraft also visibly helped Beck, whom she considers a kindred spirit and an ally, using the convention to try to bolster his fortunes as party chairman. Support from the largest SPD state organization nationally will be vital as he tries to restore his position in the party. However, we encountered no delegates who would predict that he will be SPD chancellor candidate in 2009.

¶10. (U) This message was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.
BOYSE